
Reception of the BEM Document in the Orthodox Tradition: A Response to the Paper of Theodore Stylianopoulos

K. M. GEORGE

I MUST BEGIN by expressing my unreserved appreciation for what Father Stylianopoulos has presented to us. He has articulated his reflections on a double front. On the one hand he has clarified his critical and positive approach to the BEM document from the Orthodox perspective in a very creative manner. This is done in the spirit that "it is not their text, but our text—a common text of our fellowship." On the other hand he has critically examined the Orthodox position from the perspective of the BEM document bringing out the spiritual, theological, and ecclesiological challenges and possibilities. He has also highlighted the commitment of the ecumenical movement in general and that of the Faith and Order Commission in particular to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic tradition and the reciprocal commitment of the Orthodox churches to the world fellowship of Christians. The BEM document seems to be understood by Father Stylianopoulos as an initial test of this mutual commitment. We must be immensely grateful for his reflections.

As an Indian Orthodox Christian, the Indian religious-philosophical tradition and the Eastern Christian tradition are part of my heritage. The Indian religious tradition does not have any notion of blasphemy or heresy as we see in Judaism or Christianity. People with widely varying views are accommodated within the mainstream of Hindu religion. It is legitimate for a person to say: "I am Brahman (God)" without being blasphemous. In fact it is the ultimate level of spiritual realization when the human and the divine are no longer distinguished, but experienced as one single reality. The major Indian philosophical

traditions do not know of any ultimate distinction between the Creator and the creature. A person who perceives only distinction, without realizing the non-difference between his self and the ultimate Self is in the state of *maya* (illusion) or *avidya* (ignorance). Even the so-called atheistic strands of thought are accommodated within the religious tradition. An atheistic position need not necessarily be a materialistic one. Denying God or being silent about God may sometimes be the expression of the highest spiritual experience as in the case of Buddha. An enlightened soul knows that there is *no God* apart from his realized self.

Now, the change from darkness to light, from ignorance to true knowledge does not occur as a sudden transition. It is a gradual process necessitating much askesis, spiritual, mental and physical discipline. In this process of spiritual enlightenment one is not preoccupied with doctrinal questions of purely intellectual-verbal categories. One discerns only different levels of understanding and different degrees in the intensity of experience. Spiritual life is understood as a gradual growth from inferior levels to superior levels of understanding and self-realization.

Without subscribing to any of these religious-philosophical ideas, one can find here some striking parallels with the patristic thought which is constitutive of the Eastern Christian Tradition.

1. In the Tradition of the Christian East, the primary concern is not with propositional orthodoxy. In spite of the great significance of creeds and conciliar decrees in the life of the Church, it is understood that intellectual assent to a credal proposition does not in itself constitute right belief. There is a great reluctance on the part of the Church to proliferate creeds, confessions and statements of faith. Fathers like Saint Basil of Caesarea, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa took great pains to establish the Orthodox principle that logically coherent, rationally clear and scripturally argued propositions about God do not necessarily constitute genuine *theologia*, but they might run the risk of becoming pure *technologia* leading to vain talk about God and to a war of words. The integral and experiential relation between talking about God (*theologein*) and “becoming God (*theon genesthai*),” and that between dogma and doxa, are held very high by the Church over against all excessive concern with propositional orthodoxy.

2. The patristic tradition recognizes that God’s self-revelation in human history has been a gradual process respecting the freedom of human beings. The whole human history is understood as a stage of God’s subtle, loving, persuasive—not compelling—act of raising

humanity to higher and higher levels of spiritual receptivity. Saint Gregory of Nazianos, in his theological orations tells us that theology or knowledge of the Holy Trinity develops by gradual additions. The Father makes himself known fully in the Old Testament period while the Son and the Holy Spirit are only adumbrated. In the New Testament period, God the Son is fully revealed while the fulness of the Holy Spirit is only promised. After the Pentecost, the person and power of the Holy Spirit are fully manifested. The divine economy is based on the recognition that there are various levels of spiritual perception and capacity for reception and that higher levels of receptivity are attained only gradually, in freedom and through sustained mutual interaction between God and humanity. If we are involved in this experiential process of growth, we cannot think of the life of the Church primarily in terms of schisms or heresies. Although the fathers vehemently criticized all malicious and deliberate distortions of faith, they also understood that it is our common task and responsibility to sharpen and focus the various levels of spiritual sensitivity within the community in the direction of the Good, to correct each other, to carry each other's burdens and to sustain the feeble in faith by closely integrating them to the community of faith.

I mentioned these two aspects of Orthodox understanding because they might be helpful in evaluating the BEM document in the process of reception, and also understanding what Father Stylianopoulos has stated in his paper with great discernment and balance. Referring to my first comment about propositional orthodoxy and speaking in a rather reductionist manner, I would say that the BEM document is a multiple set of theological propositions shaped by a group or group of theologians over the years. Over half a century ago when Faith and Order discussions started culminating in the production of the present document, there was no effective Orthodox and Roman Catholic involvement or input. The major assumption and motivation of the Faith and Order movement then was that a doctrinal agreement among several Protestant denominations could be brought about through commonly agreed theological statements, and thereby unity of these churches could be achieved. Gradually Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches came in to share this assumption and ideal. There is no need to question this basic goal, because it is the goal of unity which is constitutive of the ecumenical movement to which world Christianity is committed. But methodologically, if there is any lingering of the idea that commonly agreed, neatly defined theological propositions are the major instrument of unity, that should be of serious concern to us.

Father Theodore makes it very clear that this "reception" of the BEM document at this stage does not "signify that ecclesial process through which the Orthodox Church has received the authoritative decrees of Ecumenical Synods. . . ." But *ultimately* is it not the same ecclesial process the Churches are committed to by consenting to consider the question of reception? Are we not entering already the inarticulate but initial stages of that process? When that process matures it will not be the BEM document as such that matters, but the mutual embrace of ecclesial communities in the one apostolic faith in Christ. So we are going to be involved in a process of self-transcendence and in the reciprocal sharing of the apostolic experience. In the initial stages of reception, the Faith and Order Commission anticipates a further refinement and possible reformulation of the BEM document. But the text in this process of reformulation will have to be simultaneously transcended by the churches so that the end result will not remain an agreed statement but mutual reception and unity of the churches in love. A reciprocal openness to the quality of faith among the churches which are committed to unity is the essential context of the reception of the BEM document. I think this aspect is remarkably clear when Father Theodore says that the truth of BEM is "truth which the churches themselves are willing to recognize as apostolic truth reflecting the faith of the Church of all ages under the assumption that the Holy Spirit is missing neither from any of the great moments of Christian history nor from any of the churches of the fellowship today." If the Orthodox Churches are willing to consider for reception the BEM text, a document prepared not exclusively by Orthodox theologians, but together with Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians, as an *internal* document, that will mean the Orthodox Churches are deeply open to the quality of faith in other communities of ecclesial character and to the truth towards which the Holy Spirit leads us. The primary consideration now is not in terms of orthodoxy and heterodoxy as isolated doctrinal questions and neatly distinguished conceptual categories and propositions, but in terms of the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the unfolding of the truth in the appointed moments within the various levels and members of the Body of Christ.

Reception is an act of the whole Church, the Body of Christ. The highest authority to discern the issues of faith is the whole Body of Christ which is animated by the Holy Spirit. It is quite obvious to us that the problem with a document like BEM is that it runs the risk of remaining a theological text handled by the theologians, accepted or rejected by the visible structural authorities in the Church, without being examined by the authority of the whole Church. This is a real danger for all the churches committed to the BEM document, but especially

for the Orthodox Churches because of their particular structural character. Father Theodore recognizes this fully when he emphasizes the "true consensus developed among the whole people of God" and not only "a theological convergence by theologians and church representatives alone." It is obvious that we should devise practical means of disseminating the document and inviting participatory study of it by the people at the various levels of the Church. What is of crucial importance here is the nature of ecclesial authority in the Orthodox Tradition. The BEM text offers a test for the traditional Orthodox understanding of authority as distinct from the Roman Catholic and Protestant patterns.

I think the two most important issues which are of specific concern to the Orthodox in relation to the reception of the BEM document are those of apostolic faith and Orthodox ecclesiology. Since Father Theodore has dealt with them in some detail, I will limit myself to two brief comments.

Firstly, apostolic faith is not simply a matter of the past. It seems our hearts and minds are inevitably turned to a historical past whenever we speak about the apostolic faith. If apostolic faith is only a matter of the past, then Christ to whom it bears witness is only a person of the historical past. A Church which believes in the one who has come and is to come and in the Holy Spirit who still guides us to all truth can never be chained to a few centuries of early Christianity. The dynamics of future opened by the Spirit and the Messiah who comes must be seriously taken into the very understanding of the apostolic faith. Then it becomes not only something given, but also a task, a promise and an expectation. No search for unity or reception can take off unless this vast space of freedom, promise, and possibility constantly created by the Holy Spirit is recognized in our field of ecumenical vision.

Secondly, while I fully agree with what Father Theodore says about the status of Orthodox ecclesiology in the WCC circles, I would also say that, taking into account the theological-historical context in which the World Council was originally constituted and the vast majority of the Protestant member churches which do not seem to have much concern with ecclesiology or at best consider it as one of the most peripheral of subjects, there is no immediate solution to the problem. For Orthodox Churches to stand back makes this situation only worse. Here is another test and challenge for the Orthodox Tradition. Only the quality of Orthodox witness in this matter, and no threat or complaint, can contribute positively toward the improvement of the situation. Only by our commitment to resolve the problems within the Orthodox family in line with our ecclesiological stand and by initiating a deep and extensive spiritual-theological renewal within our Churches can we be of

any help to the world fellowship of churches in witnessing together to the true ecclesia, the Body of Christ. This again is an immense task laid upon the Orthodox Churches and a great call by the Holy Spirit to look ahead to the seemingly impossible with genuine hope and love.

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